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Beyond the colonial divide: African diasporic and Indigenous youth alliance building for HIV prevention

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Abstract

African diasporic and North American Indigenous communities have both been greatly impacted by the colonization of the Americas. Historic and contemporary relations between these communities have been fraught with complex commonalities, contradictions and conflicts. These communities have remained connected across time and space through their shared and distinct histories of resistance and oppression. Both communities have suffered the embodiment of systemic violence in the form of elevated rates of communicable and chronic diseases such as HIV. This paper examines the decolonizing potential of collaboration between these two communities in their response to HIV. It begins by unpacking the history of racialized subjugation faced by Indigenous and African, Caribbean and Black communities in the Americas, with a focus on Canada. This background contextualizes empirical findings of an arts-based intervention that explored notions of identity, resistance and solidarity building between young people in these groups.

Keywords: *Black; Indigenous; youth, HIV Prevention; art and community-based research; solidarity*

Introduction

African diasporic and North American Indigenous communities have felt the harmful impacts of colonization for generations. They have remained connected across time and space through their shared and distinct histories of resistance and oppression. As a result of systematic violence, both communities suffer elevated rates of communicable and chronic diseases, for example HIV and diabetes. This paper examines the utility and decolonizing potential of collaboration between Black and Indigenous youth in the HIV response. It begins by highlighting some of the central forms of colonial oppression faced by Black and Indigenous peoples in the Americas, and specifically in Canada. This background contextualizes empirical findings of an arts-based intervention that explored notions of identity, resistance and solidarity building between young people in these groups.

We use the terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous¹” interchangeably when referring to the First Peoples of Turtle Island.² It is important to note however that there is inconsistent use and broad disagreement on the legitimacy of appropriate labels for the identity of Indigenous peoples in Canada and elsewhere (Lawrence, 2003). Legislated definitions were meaningless to Indigenous nations prior to colonization. They are thought to have homogenized hundreds of diverse Indigenous tribes, nations, and cultures; forcibly replaced traditional Indigenous ways of identifying the self, that often relied on a relationship to land and collective identity (Lawrence, 2003); and these legislated labels gave the Canadian government substantial control over Indigenous identification and community structures (LaRocque, 2011; Lawrence, 2003). Furthermore, we use the short term ‘Black’ to refer to youth of African Caribbean (ACB) ancestry. Similar to the term Aboriginal, ‘Black’ has specific socio-cultural significance and homogenizes otherwise heterogeneous peoples from different cultures, geographies, languages and histories. It is also important to note that in many cases African diasporic peoples are themselves displaced Indigenous peoples. However, the labels Black or ACB are consistent with much of the Canadian literature in the HIV field, which does not disaggregate data based on country of origin within ACB communities. The term ‘Black’ is also consistent with the way many people of African descent in North America refer to themselves.

Historically entrenched oppression and health

Understanding the historic forms of oppression faced by ACB and Indigenous peoples in the Americas helps to make sense of ongoing experiences of institutionalized racism. It also helps us understand the forms of resistance struggles these communities have been engaged in,

¹ “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories or parts of them” (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 106).

² Turtle Island is the Indigenous term used to refer to North America. The name is said to have origins in a Haudenosaunee creation story (Kurt, 2007).

specifically around health, wellbeing and HIV, and the persistent tensions of cross-community partnerships between these two groups.

For Aboriginal people in Canada, precipitous health declines were noted as early as the 18th century. This was due in part to policies that legislated their extermination and marked them as targets for biological warfare through the intentional spread of communicable diseases, as well as dishonored treaties that disrupted Indigenous ownership of their territory and traditional ways of life (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009). Genocidal attacks on Indigenous peoples in the Americas represents “the largest holocaust the world has ever known,” decimating one quarter of the earth’s population over a span of 150 years (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 106). It is estimated that roughly 2-5% of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island survived, making this relatively small group of thrivers the direct ancestors of all Indigenous peoples on the continent (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009). Later, the patriarchal *Indian Act* became one of the first statutes in Canada that promoted assimilation and legislated violent state intervention (Wright, 1993). As examples, these policies were detrimental to Aboriginal spiritual, political and familial structures through the kidnapping of Aboriginal children to residential schools and the imprisonment of Aboriginal communities on reserves (Wright, 1993). While the controversial *Indian Act* has been amended several times over the last century, it remains on the books and continues to mandate and guide state relations with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Stolen from their native lands, traded, bred and treated like cattle, the sexualities and humanity of African people have long been the targets of subjugation by colonialists and western institutions. It is estimated that as many as 20 million Black people were taken from Africa during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a devastating holocaust which spanned five centuries (1400s - 1800s) (The Historica-Dominion Institute, 2008). “Unique in its global scale” and its focus on the construct of racial difference, the slave trade harnessed labor for production and wealth accumulation for the British North American Empire in the Industrial Revolution (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 106). This helped to “shape global relations of imperialism” and the realities of the African diaspora throughout the world for generations thereafter (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 106). Canada was formally incorporated into the slave trade of British North America as early as the 1600s. In 1685, France gave colonists of New France permission to keep Black and Aboriginal (i.e. members of the ‘Pawnee Indian’ nation) slaves in the wake of a supposed labor shortage (The Historica-Dominion Institute, 2008).

The relationship of Aboriginal people to slavery in the Americas is a complicated one. While some Aboriginal people were enslaved along with Black people well into the 19th Century (e.g. the Pawnee Indian nation (Cooper, 2006; Sturm, 2002), and Indigenous peoples in “California, Mexico and the US South West” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6)), others aided the escape of slaves to lives of freedom within terrain unknown to colonialists (e.g. the Taino of the Caribbean (Beauvoir-Dominique, n.d.)); adopted slaves into their family and community structures (e.g. the Iroquois Confederacy; Caribs and Arawaks) (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Cooper, 2006; Sturm, 2002); and owned slaves themselves (e.g. the Natchez; Tawasa; Mohawk; Cherokee; Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples). As a result, the relations between

these two groups are historically and contemporarily fraught with complex commonalities, contradictions and conflicts.

There is a long history of institutional racism, violent and ill-intentioned health research, and state-sanctioned examples of attempts to control and dishonor Black and Indigenous bodies. Some examples include: biological and germ warfare on Aboriginal communities since the dawn of conquest in the Americas. Some examples include: biological and germ warfare on Aboriginal communities since the dawn of conquest in the Americas (Wright, 1993); forced and coerced sterilization of Aboriginal women in Canada (Browne & Fiske, 2001); and the intentional withholding of treatment from Black men with syphilis in the Tuskegee trials (Freimuth et al., 2001). These experiences have cultivated immense distrust of and dissatisfaction with government research and healthcare institutions (Freimuth et al., 2001; Robertson, 2007; Smith, 1999; Williams et al., 2009). There still remains modern manifestations of these encounters as ACB and Aboriginal communities continue to report receiving a lower quality of care by healthcare practitioners, who are predominantly Caucasian (Flicker et al., 2010; Prentice, 2007; Robertson, 2007; Williams et al., 2009).

Inherently racist policies, bureaucratic incompetence, and systemic violence are the continuation of colonialism and the dishonoring of treaties and land claims. They operate to disrupt, displace and disenfranchise entire communities. Health inequity is but one legacy of Canada's long history of socially and geographically oppressing the "other." Left to cope with hardships such as poverty, violence and racism, Black and Aboriginal communities are placed at elevated risk for poor health. These oppressions literally become embodied in the form of diseases like HIV/AIDS.

The history of interconnected resistance struggles and HIV

It is important to name the worldviews of Black and Indigenous communities, as well as the long history of collaboration between these groups, which contextualizes and inspires the importance of cross-community responses to the HIV epidemic. Many Indigenous and Black feminist frameworks consist of a holistic understanding of the body situated at the intersection of the physical, social, cultural, spiritual, emotional, and mental (Dhamoon, 2015; Wilson, 2008). Bodies are understood to be part of an ecosystem and are (literally and figuratively) connected to and in relationship with all other living beings. As a result, relationships and collaboration are integral to Indigenous worldviews (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). With respect to cultural symbols that encourage partnership-building, for some Aboriginal cultures the Medicine Wheel is used to symbolize the role of every group of people in the circle of life and the creation of a balanced universe. Inherent to these traditional teachings of the medicine wheel, is the importance of working together. The wampum belt is another cultural tool used historically to symbolize treaty relationships, mutual peace, respect and agreements for groups such as the Haudenosaunee (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009). A parallel term from South Africa that symbolizes the values of interconnection, interdependence and humanity is "Ubuntu" which

means “I exist because you exist” (Mokgoro, 1997). Likewise, the West African Adinkra symbol, Nkonsonkonson represents unity, responsibility, human relationships and interdependence (Nana, 2009). These terms from Indigenous cultures around the world depict worldviews and ontologies centered on relationship-building, interdependence and interconnections (Wilson, 2008).

Given the worldviews from which these communities hail, unsurprisingly social movements within Indigenous and African diasporic communities have historically informed and inspired each other. For instance, Lee Maracle (2010) highlights how the black power movement and the work of Franz Fanon inspired the red power movement, the yellow power movement, and people power movements across the Americas and around the world (Maracle, 2010). “When the African revolts occurred, our folks plugged into that and watched it on television together. It was clear that you were allowed to demonstrate whatever injustices existed... we rose up... particularly urban Aboriginal people,” recalls Maracle about the start of the Red Power movement (2010, p. 361). Similarly, Indigenous movements for sovereignty, land, cultural reclamation, anti-racism, decolonization and human rights in North America have enjoyed a critical transnational connection to radical movements globally, including the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa; Indigenous struggles in Australia and South America; and Third World liberation (Maracle, 2010). Within Canada more specifically, Black-Mi'kmaw intermarriage in Nova Scotia represented resistance to extermination policies against Mi'kmaw people and the marginalization of Black loyalists from settler society (Lawrence & Dua, 2005).

Today, we see the heightening of consciousness raising and social movements in the form of mass protests against anti-black racism and police targeting of people of colour; as well as decade-long campaigns to bring awareness to the appropriation of Indigenous land and culture (e.g. the Oka resistance and Idle No More movements); and the “ongoing resistance of Indigenous women and Two Spirit peoples to all forms of colonial gendered violence,” (Simpson, 2014). These movements mark a critical moment for consciousness raising about the violence against ‘unwelcome’ bodies in the continued colonial nation-building project of the Americas. It is a moment for intersectional mobilizing that challenges the raced, gendered, classed and hetero-patriarchal organization of society. In her essay titled, *Indict The System: Indigenous and Black Connected Resistance*, Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson recognizes the spirit of outrage within Black and Indigenous communities for “a colonial system designed to destroy Black and Indigenous love” and humanity (Simpson, 2014). As Simpson highlights, the similarities between the historic and ongoing experiences of African diasporic and Indigenous communities mark important sites for co-resistance, and this is especially true within the HIV response.

Social mobilizing and critical resistance have been an integral part of the HIV movement since the dawn of the epidemic. Dissent and confrontational resistance was integral for garnering attention to HIV/AIDS globally (Guta, Murray, & McClelland, 2011). However, programmatic (economic, biomedical, technological, and pharmacological) interventions have since dominated HIV prevention, treatment and care that privilege particular ways of knowing and doing, and

silences activism (Guta et al., 2011). These institutions and structures have become increasingly “professionalized, bureaucratic” spaces that are often engaged in “complex relationships with state funders” with neoliberal interests that limit radical advocacy and resistance within the political climate of HIV (Guta et al., 2011, p. 17). Programmatic strategies do not account for and therefore do not address “all of the injustices and forms of structural violence” that drive new HIV infections within African diasporic and Indigenous communities (Guta et al., 2011, p. 24).

Challenging these hegemonies, some racialized and Indigenous scholars have framed advocacy and programming within larger conversations about racism and colonization, due to their unbridled impact on HIV transmission and the sexual cultures and health of these communities (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; Morgenson, 2009; Robertson, 2007; Simpson, 2004). Further, communities have advocated for the importance of contextualizing disease within anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles (Catungal, 2013). In Toronto, ethno-specific AIDS Service Organizations, such as the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, emerged out of community-based struggles to respond in culturally appropriate ways to the mounting crisis of HIV in Black communities in the 1980s (Catungal, 2013). They aimed to disrupt ubiquitous whiteness within the AIDS service sector; provide relevant health promotion messaging; and foster spaces for culturally appropriate sexual health services “for people of colour by people of colour” (Catungal, 2013, p. 263). Similarly, Indigenous-led AIDS activism has stressed Indigenous control and management of health systems and health care to prevent and care for people impacted by HIV (Morgenson, 2009). Organizations such as the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) focus on sexual and reproductive health in a much more holistic way to include culture and traditional ceremony and healing practices, cultural survival, Indigenous sovereignty, human rights and arts activism. The NYSHN has also built alliances across community boundaries with communities of colour and various Indigenous groups in Australia and South Africa. Broadening the scope of how HIV is understood within African diasporic and Indigenous communities; and linking it to the convergence of other inequities and ongoing movements may be integral to information dissemination, community mobilization, and ultimately community survival.

Tensions in solidarity

Solidarity building between African diasporic and Indigenous communities is not unproblematic. These spaces are filled with tensions and contradictions that remain unresolved, making the project of partnership-building across community lines an important but challenging one. Indigenous and critical race scholars and activists have raised questions about the potential for alliance building across communities from different political frameworks. For instance, some scholars question the anti-colonial and decolonization frameworks taken up by diasporic people of colour living in white settler colonies (Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Some key discussions include whether people of colour are settlers, what their place is in the structure

of white settler colonialism, and what kinds of anti- and de-colonial alliances they can form with Indigenous peoples in white settler colonies. Some scholarship suggests that anti-racism, much like other leftist narratives or social justice frameworks, compartmentalize Indigenous struggle, subsuming “Indigenous peoples into broader discourse about systemic oppression” (Walia, 2012). The contention here is that these frameworks often render Native peoples a racial or ethnic group suffering racial discrimination that coincides with that of all people of colour, rather than diverse and sovereign nations undergoing colonization (Smith, 2008)

Lawrence and Dua in their article *Decolonizing Antiracism* (2005), critique anti-racist theory, practice and affiliated scholars for failing to ground their critiques in the original and ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous peoples of the lands they now occupy. In this view, antiracist theorists fail to take-up the question of “land as contested space” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 126). They argue that anti-racist theory and practice upholds and sustains colonial discourse, and that people of colour are complicit in ongoing processes of settler colonialism and nation-building by participating in practices such as the erasure of Indigenous presence through theories of race and racism that exclude or marginalize Indigenous peoples, relegating their experiences and colonial processes to the past (Dhamoon, 2015). Similarly, Indigenous activists have critiqued the fight for civil rights, humanism and inclusion within the laws, economies and institutions of the very colonial settler state responsible for their oppression (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009). In this, the colonial “promise of integration and civil rights is predicated on securing a share of settler-appropriated, (capitalist) wealth (and citizenship) as the answer to all problems” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 7). This overlooks the fact that Native genocide and settler colonialism are not only historic, but ongoing processes. When race scholars lack an analysis of settler colonialism, many racial theorists fail to imagine alternative forms of governance not founded on a racialized settler state (Smith, 2008).

In response, critical race and anti-colonial scholars Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright (2005) agree with Lawrence and Dua on the importance of highlighting the failures of the civil-rights and multicultural frameworks. However, along with other scholars, they’ve challenged Lawrence and Dua by critiquing their conflation of settler colonialism and immigration, and the perpetuation of xenophobia and racism within many Indigenous movements (Sharma & Wright, 2005). According to Sharma and Wright (2005), Lawrence and Dua ignore the role of globalization, western imperialism and slavery in the disenfranchisement of Black-led nations around the world. In turn, this contributes to the often forced transnational migration of people of colour across geopolitical and cultural borders (Sharma & Wright, 2005). Sharma and Wright refuse the idea that all migrants are settler colonialists because ironically, in many cases, migration is one response of people who have been colonized and dispossessed (Sharma & Wright, 2005). This complicates Lawrence and Dua’s tendency to conflate people of colour as an uncontested part of white settler society. Proponents of this argument hold that settlers are not immigrants because “immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous governance structures, autonomy and history” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). As a result, people of colour have materially

different experiences than white settlers. Uniformly applying the term “settler” to refer to people of colour – and more specifically Black people – projects whiteness and white settler colonial responsibility and guilt onto bodies of colour, thereby erasing the white supremacist violence of anti-blackness (Morgenson, 2014; Sharma & Wright, 2005).

Scholars like Lee Maracle and Andrea Smith have challenged the friction and “oppression olympics” between Indigenous and anti-racist/people of colour activists and scholars (Smith, 2006, p. 66) – “whereby groups are positioned as if they are competing for the mantle of the most oppressed, without disrupting hegemonies of power” (Dhamoon, 2015). Maracle and Smith argue that white supremacy benefits from the colonial project to ‘divide and conquer’ through state-imposed policies and structures (i.e. scarce funding allocations and social supports) that encourages marginalized communities to splinter and inflict violence on one another (Maracle, 2010; Smith, 2006). For Smith, White Supremacy is upheld by separate and distinct, but interrelated logics she dubs ‘pillars,’ (Slavery/capitalism; Genocide/Capitalism; and Orientalism/War). Smith argues that we are all differently oppressed in relation to white supremacy, while at the same time we are structurally implicated in upholding these hegemonies of power (Dhamoon, 2015; Smith, 2006). This is because “distinctive systems of oppression such as racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity need each other in order to (develop and) function” (Dhamoon, 2015). They are co-produced and depend on each other even when they sometimes appear to be in contradiction. Smith has argued that there is insufficient dialogue between anti-racist and Indigenous thinkers and organizers. As a result, scholars and activists engaged in race struggles fail to pay attention to how settler colonialism intersects with white supremacy in the Americas (Smith, 2008). Meanwhile, Indigenous struggles fail to pay attention to the importance of race and white supremacy within a decolonization framework (Smith, 2008). Without a critique of the settler state as simultaneously white supremacist and racist, “all settlers become morally undifferentiated,” irrespective of the fact that migration is racially differentiated (Smith, 2008). Thus, on either side of the conversation, both Black and Indigenous people can recapitulate the logics of white supremacy even as they contest it (Smith, 2008).

Dismantling one structure of domination (economic, gendered, racial, spatial, religious etc) is only secured by attending to the myriad of ways in which domination reproduces itself in relation to other structures of domination across axes of differentiation. A politics of solidarity and collaboration through the act of struggling together against interrelated social issues may provide important sites to simultaneously challenge the multiple dimensions of what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the ‘matrix of domination’ (Dhamoon, 2015; Smith, 2006). Collective organizing necessitates coalitions across communities and issues. This perspective provides an intersectional framework that is simultaneously anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and decolonial for building alliances and mobilizing diverse groups (Dhamoon, 2015).

Questions still remain: what might solidarity-building between these groups look like on the ground? Where do we go from here? To begin to explore these questions, we engaged a group of young Black and Indigenous youth leaders who have been involved in HIV prevention work in a series of facilitated group conversations and guided arts-based activities. Together we

asked: How do African diasporic and Indigenous youth leaders view the potential for alliance-building between their respective communities? In what ways do youth leaders embrace and/or resist moving beyond the colonial divide? How can we talk about and artistically represent the benefits and challenges of these partnerships?

Methods

This project brought together a small group of Indigenous and ACB youth leaders, most of who had previously participated in separate HIV prevention-focused digital storytelling research projects. Digital Storytelling is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that consists of the making of short visual narratives that synthesize images, video, audio recordings of voice, music, and text to create compelling accounts of experience (Gubrium, 2009).

The *Taking Action: Art and Aboriginal Youth Leadership for HIV Prevention* project engaged seventeen Aboriginal youth leaders from across Canada (Flicker, Danforth, Konsmo, et al., 2014; Flicker, Danforth, Oliver, et al., 2014; Oliver et al., 2015). The *Sex and YOUth* project engaged a smaller cohort of four ACB youth from the Greater Toronto Area (Wilson & Flicker, pending publication). Further methodological details on these projects are contained in previous publications (Flicker & Nixon, 2014; Wilson, 2011; Wilson et al., under review; Wilson & Flicker, pending publication). In both projects, participants created digital stories or short personal videos that explored their relationship to HIV prevention and activism and took part in a variety of discussions and activities related to health promotion and decolonization. A subset of the original youth leaders in these two projects were re-contacted two years after their initial involvement to participate in focus groups/talking circles and a mural making workshop (see Figure 1). Importantly, all of the young people who participated in the Beyond the Colonial Divide project were already involved in some leadership capacity within their communities. Many were already mobilizing their communities around issues related to sexual health and HIV.



Figure 1: The process for the Beyond the Colonial Divide project

The first talking circle consisted of 4 ACB youth leaders engaged in sexual health- and HIV- related research and health promotion. Three of these young people had previously created their own digital stories as part of the Sex and YOUTh project. To encourage dialogue, I screened a few of the Taking Action digital stories created by Aboriginal youth leaders. The videos selected dealt with issues such as colonization, racism and violence, alienation, environmental degradation and substance use. The second talking circle consisted of 5 Aboriginal youth, two of whom participated in the Taking Action project. In this forum, I screened the four Sex and YOUTh digital stories made by the ACB youth. In comparison, the videos of the ACB youth dealt with issues such as parent-youth communication; teen pregnancy and preparing for parenthood; the role of religion in defining identity and sexuality; healthy relationships; and youth engagement in transactional sex. While the digital stories selected for screenings were not meant to speak for all youth of a particular community, they provided a meaningful starting point from which to discuss the similarities and differences between Black and Indigenous youth experiences in Canada when it comes to topics such as the factors impacting their sexual health, identity politics, and Black-Aboriginal relations. During the talking circles we discussed the digital stories created by youth of other communities; similarities and differences in the issues faced by other youth; and the relevance and practicality of building cross community partnerships. These discussions lay the foundation for a two-day collaborative mural making workshop, wherein the youth leaders worked together to visually depict what alliance building

might look like and artistically express their thoughts on the conversations had during the talking circles.

Youth participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years. Half of those who participated identified as male (n=5) and half as female (n=4). Data for this paper are drawn from the two focus groups and collaborative mural-making workshop conducted with the youth leaders, which were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Detailed field notes were also taken. In unpacking the research findings, I conducted a content analysis where I used themes such as “partnership building between Black and Aboriginal communities;” “Challenges to partnership building;” and “benefits of partnership building” to categorize the data.

Results

Many of the youth leaders were very optimistic about the potential for solidarity building across community lines. This optimism was expressed artistically in the mural (See Figure 2). Connecting urban and rural landscapes is a centrally located Medicine Wheel, with an HIV ribbon in the middle. The Medicine Wheel was included in the mural to symbolize the setting sun (which itself symbolizes a life giving force in some cultures (i.e. Egyptian, Iroquois and Plains cultures (Agarwal, 2013)) cast against the larger landscape. According to teachings associated with the Medicine Wheel, there is a role for every race of people within the greater circle of life in order to create a balanced universe. In this vein, each group of people, hailing from “All Directions” or the different regions of the globe (North, West, South and East), have a role to play in the stability and balance of the natural world. All people hold an equal place in the circle so the domination of any one people wreaks havoc and imbalance. Youth really wanted to highlight this point, as they located their community struggles in systems of white supremacy. Participants also chose to use many images of multi-cultural hands, in the Medicine Wheel and elsewhere, to symbolize interconnection and the work required to build partnerships and alliances.



Figure 2: Collaborative Mural – All Directions

In the talking circles, many youth expressed this positive sentiment about the utility of such alliances for progressing the fight against HIV in communities with similar, yet distinct experiences of oppression. These participants identified with the struggles of colonization and marginalization experienced by youth from different communities and cultures, and they were optimistic that working together would mean that more people could be mobilized if they would understand the cross-cultural underpinnings of the social determinants of HIV.

..I don't think (working together) should be too much [of] a challenge because we are all coming here with the minds being open anyways or somewhat being open into taking opinions of other people and working toward something. So right there we already want to work together (ACB youth, focus group)

...like it would be great ummm [if] we could partner up together, there would be more of us. We could understand each other's issues that we are going through (Aboriginal youth, focus group).

I think it is going to be a heart to heart connection to bring our minds to one while making this big mural. I think it will take close to an hour for each and every one of us to actually like connect on one level and I was saying before, if we were all connected one mind sense.... for us to actually see each other (ACB youth, focus group)

An important element of this optimism was the discussion among participants about the history of collaboration between African diasporic and Aboriginal peoples in the Americas, and particularly in the United States where one youth highlighted the history of Seminoles who share both African and Aboriginal heritage (LaRocque, 2011). This same young person also talked

about the ways that both Aboriginal and African diasporic communities share a history of using the arts (e.g., music and dance) to mobilize social movements, promote healing and challenge oppression. The arts were also regarded as an important form of cultural exchange and partnership building. Many of the Aboriginal youth leaders were especially excited about the potential for the exchange and sharing of cultural knowledge and the potential utility of such knowledge exchange with regards to health, the body and healing as an alternative approach to combatting HIV in their communities. Inherent to these discussions was the notion of the exchange of culture as a useful process for cultural survival.

Amazing music...I initially learned about the Seminole people when I took a first year music class at York and it was like this really cool mesh of call and response and it was a condition of slavery and escaping oppression and things like came into this really neat musical place and then just the roots of all jazz and rock all come from that (Aboriginal youth leader, focus group).

That's the most common thing of like Aboriginals and Blacks is dance (ACB youth, focus group)

I think what could connect us through that is our different cultural experiences ...the idea that people coming together to share what they know and to share their cultural knowledges... let's say for example to connect the Aboriginal community with the Black community, to share our cultural traditions with healthy sexuality and healthy body and what that means through different cultures and connect it through that and then to meet on the level of HIV and AIDs and to say "you know what we have our understandings of the body and you have your understandings of the body like how do we work together to protect these understandings for everyone (Aboriginal youth, focus group).

These discussions were represented artistically in the mural through collage (see Figure 3), where the youth opted to fill-in the landscape with pictures and messages cut from magazines and newspapers that depicted the different social movements that resonated with them. The HIV Movement; the Idle No More Movement; The People Power Movements of the 60's and 70's; Civil Rights; Indigenous sovereignty protests; slavery and prison abolition movements were all represented in the images the youth included in the collage. Interestingly, these images of radical protest and transformative, community-mobilized justice, were often simultaneously depicted next to, and in juxtaposition with, images of religion (e.g. Holy Crosses); assimilation (Indigenous children in European garb); and enslavement (e.g. shackles and chains, people of colour in bondage) – which are important parts of African and Indigenous histories and realities in North America.



Figure 3: The use of collage in the All Directions Mural.

In the focus groups, the process of sharing digital stories was an important step in mutual education and bridging connections between the groups of young people. This process helped them gain insight into each other's narratives and experiences. This platform of sharing also provided each youth insight into the struggles going on in the communities of other youth in the workshop. The youth had a lot to say about each other's stories and the ways in which they connected to these narratives. For instance, both Aboriginal and Black young people really related to the digital stories that spoke about the sexuality and self-esteem of young women in their communities; teen pregnancy; lateral violence and internalized racism; and narratives of personal redemption and walking a positive/good path.

While collaborative spaces were important for educating each other and learning about the other's struggles, histories of oppression, and breaking down barriers between communities, some youth saw these spaces as important for sharing resources and confronting stereotypes. This was of particular importance for Aboriginal youth who reported being frequently confronted with stereotypes and assumptions held by non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal youth discussed the importance that non-Aboriginal partners open their minds and decolonize the way they understand the world and approach relations with Indigenous people, so as to not perpetuate violence. This preparatory work was seen as vital for such partnerships to be productive and conducive to meaningful alliances and positive change. Youth identified appropriation; pity for Indigenous struggles; and colonial education of Indigenous realities, as some of the challenges that regularly hinder meaningful partnership building.

I think the Aboriginals and the African Canadians, they are view[ed] in this very bad way. Like when you ask them [people in the general public] about the Aboriginal, about how they think, like HIV/AIDS, or alcohol addiction, those things, they think Black, they think gangs. Then if you tell to think Africa then they think hunger but they don't know about the beautiful things about the cultures...I think us blacks and Aboriginals and brown [people] are in the same situations (ACB youth, focus group)

A little bit mixed emotions with multicultural people. I don't know it was kind of weird yesterday at this workshop I went to. It was every culture that was feeling sorry for Indigenous people and the residential school and what was happening to us today with Stephen Harper and all that stuff... we are trying to get those issues addressed, we are not having other people trying to feel sorry for [the] Indigenous movement at all. (Aboriginal youth, focus group)

Non-Indigenous need to decolonize on so many different levels. But [I] know for the fact that there is a lot of misappropriation that is taking place ...so it has pros and cons. At the same time it has to be done properly so that people aren't just being exploited ... I think that as long as people are coming within a good space like a good heart and a good head then I am all for you know community and working together but it all has to be done in a good way. (Aboriginal youth, focus group)

These points had particular salience in the focus group with ACB youth who struggled to understand the impact of historical and ongoing trauma on Indigenous communities, as many had never been taught this history in school. This made for interesting comparisons and questions about the issues raised in the digital stories of Aboriginal youth. For instance, one ACB youth found it hard to believe that alcohol could have violent and detrimental impacts on entire communities. Another youth really struggled to understand the importance placed on nature and land emphasized in many of the Aboriginal youth stories, as he did not like camping or being outdoors. Meanwhile other youth were learning about the environmental disaster wreaked by pipelines for the first time through the digital stories. As a result, the facilitator and community elder had to provide these youth some of the socio-historical context to help them better understand the importance of what the Aboriginal youth were naming in their stories. All of the ACB youth were really surprised by the history of Indigenous peoples and the colonial links to African diasporic people in the Caribbean. They were upset that they had not learned this history in school. This highlights the many ways settlers of colour, and specifically members of the African Diaspora, are often socially, educationally, and historically distanced from Indigenous struggles in Canada.

The tensions around the disconnect of people of colour, as well as some Indigenous youth, from Indigenous history and culture was exemplified during the mural-making workshop when on the second day, a couple of the Indigenous youth voiced their concern that the colours on the medicine wheel were not painted by the larger group in the correct, culturally appropriate places in accordance with Mississauga tradition. This is important because the Greater Toronto Area is situated on the traditional territory of the Mississauga's of New Credit.

"We're on Mississauga territory, but this is the Cree Medicine Wheel. We're on Mississauga territory though, there's only one, an Anishinabe territory...this kinda seems messed up. Doesn't make sense because the white is supposed to be in the north and the red is supposed to be in the south." (Aboriginal youth, workshop)

While the colours on the medicine wheel were eventually corrected, this instance highlights some of the historical-cultural barriers to partnership-building within and across community lines. In this vein, reasonably, some of the Aboriginal youth leaders stressed the importance that Indigenous communities work on healing themselves first, and uniting their own voices as diverse communities fighting for Indigenous struggles before building partnerships with other groups across cultural and racial lines.

Know why it's going to be a challenge? Because we are still working on the Indigenous people's ourselves. We are still, look how long we've been doing this you know. It's probably going to continue for a while yet. How are we going to collaborate with others, it's so difficult for us as one to get our own voices heard....So it's going to be kind of difficult (Aboriginal youth leader, focus group)

We have so much healing to do within our own peoples that might be a challenge that we need to heal ourselves before we partner up with other communities...cuz umm if we can't take care of ourselves, how are we going to help other people (Aboriginal youth, focus group)

Youth discussed some of the challenges to partnership building across community lines, which included tensions in the issues different groups may prioritize and fight for; challenges in agreeing on one issue that represents the concerns and realities of multiple groups; and as articulated above, different cultural values and knowledge. In this, youth expressed from personal experience the struggle different groups may have if they have competing interests and are expected to share their platform of oppression or histories with others, which may create barriers to understanding each other and working together. Youth also identified the role of colonialism in contributing to the struggle different groups face in trying to relate to each other and find common ground in working together.

I think the challenges would be both of us think that we deserve better, so it will be hard to listen to someone who says "I went through something worse than that." (ACB youth, focus group)

"What about our language then? In the residential school... Because I am third generation residential school survivor. You know. What about the languages, you know. I don't know but this is the first time I heard about this but Black people being in residential schools. I don't know how to take it but I've been dealing with it ever since I was born. And this is the first time I am hearing about this Black residential school like it brings questions...and maybe a little bit of anger too but not racism or nothing like that. (Aboriginal youth leader, focus group)

Everyone is fighting their own issues. I just feel like we are both fighting just different things. I don't know too much about the Black culture. However, I know they went through so much and I know it's the same deal for Native Americans. However, we are all still going through those fights and struggles but although it's very similar, I feel like it's different in a way...Maybe it is more similar than I

think but I think it's just because the Native culture has just been so isolated and the white culture has been so racist towards the black culture and it kind of isolating them into their own group. It didn't really give a chance for Black and native communities to kind of mesh together yet. Maybe that's why I am thinking they are fighting different battles. (Aboriginal youth, workshop)

While Black youth alluded to concerns about racial tension in the talking circle discussions, they were optimistic about working together and presented less critical opinions on partnership-building. Comparatively, the Aboriginal youth leaders offered personal struggles with anti-black racism as a barrier in their own communities to partnership building, and they problematized the notion of multiculturalism. It is important to note here that while ACB youth tended to speak about their experiences with race-relations strictly within the Toronto context, many of the Indigenous youth drew from their experiences in smaller, 'less diverse' communities outside of Toronto.

I feel like Toronto is more diverse. I feel like everyone is more together as opposed to like you are this, I don't want to hang out with you. I feel like parents are more open to different cultures and races. That's how I feel. (ACB youth, focus group)

My mom cannot wrap her head around the fact that there are Black Indians like she can't get it. We've lived through this entire narrative of being white. It's just so, it's just so baffling to me that this still happens and it took her, and she is still, she has gained so much more of a lens on things but seriously it is embarrassing... she is like my primary source of seeing these things pan out just like how much it is internalized. I have to do that intergenerational work to figure out where they come from... She is totally behind the times but she is just so open with that. But she is still again got to this place where she is realizing as I am what these assumptions and feelings say and what is actually going on and you have huge rifts like that and unstated things that you really got to start talking about... you really do see the systems that it comes from in the experiences with my mother. Right? I can watch her be somebody who experienced that same thing and have absolutely no qualm about turning around [and doing the same thing]. (Aboriginal youth leader, focus group)

People believe that we are living in a post-colonial space and that we decided that we are multicultural and I think it is very dogmatic and I think it is super problematic because, it allows you to be in a place of apathy and it doesn't take action...But I mean, just like anything else, just because it is put out there like an official anything, particularly in this climate, it doesn't match the ground. So a lot of what I see here happening in the city - and I am sure the well intentioned folks who set-up the tables and champion multiculturalism and I like to think that they were carrying their hearts when they had that vision of creating that space. I can feel like that in some of the spaces in Toronto that we are getting at those conversations...[but] as a policy, as a political piece, it's entire, it is one of those fraudulent assumptions. (Aboriginal youth, focus group)



Figure 4: All Directions Mural – Among the messages represented on the mural through histo-cultural symbols, the night sky in the top left corner of the mural is where one of the Indigenous youth saw a grandfather spirit.

Racial tension was not only discussed in the focus groups, the subject came up repeatedly throughout the collaborative mural-making workshop. For instance, as expressed in his quotes, one Aboriginal youth participant had recently been at an event where he was confronted with sympathy for Indigenous struggles by people of colour. This participant did not appreciate being pitied or victimized, as he mentions that Indigenous communities are addressing their issues with the Canadian government. As a result, this youth expressed his concerns and scepticism of the effectiveness of inter-community partnership building; as he quipped during one particular discussion, “*we should just give up.*” On the first day of the workshop this youth had an outburst when one of the young Black men in the group touched him to find out if he was doing ok. He quickly stood up from his chair stating loudly “*keep your hands to yourself. That should be added to the ground rules.*” For much of the remainder of the workshop this youth opted to be present but he did not wish to contribute to the artistic composition of the mural, until the second day when he saw what he regarded as a “grandfather spirit” in the mural that he felt was an expression of approval from the ancestral spirits for the collaborative process (see Figure 4). Despite this, following the workshop this youth expressed problematic sentiments in his debriefing about how he and the other Indigenous male participant felt about the workshop.

Much of his language perpetuates colonial, xenophobic and racist terminology that is important to unpack.

“The workshop...it didn’t work. Me and (name of Aboriginal youth) we were talking about it, the reasons why and I think its cuz you have laid back, civilized youth and really uncivilized, pushy, in your face Black youth ... and they are that way because of the community they are from. They just weren’t interested in working with us Aboriginal youth who are not as pushy and more civilized.”
(Aboriginal youth, post-workshop)

Ironically, this Indigenous participant uses the term “civilized” when differentiating between ACB and Aboriginal youth. Interchangeably used with equally offensive terms such as “barbarian,” and “wild,” the term “civilized” has roots in colonial representations of Indigenous peoples around the globe as primitive and degenerate, in comparison to Europeans. It is clear this youth has internalized these representations of Black people. Importantly, however, this youth has more recently come full circle. He has since built a friendship with one of the ACB youth from the workshops:

I finally get it, I finally see your vision. Me and (ACB youth leader from workshop) hang out all the time and we connect in the way you were talking about, only through film. Me, my cousin, (ACB youth leader) and (name) (an ACB man) were sitting around talking about the history of hip hop and Indigenous hip hop and it just hit me – this is what Ciann saw, I am only just seeing it now and all I kept thinking was, I wish Ciann was here to witness what we were taking part in. So I finally see what you were talking about, I finally see your vision. (Aboriginal youth, post-workshop)

The various tensions and conflicts highlighted by the youth throughout the workshop were also represented quite vividly in the images and symbols the youth chose to include on the mural (See Figure 5). For instance, while many hands were painted on the mural to symbolize messages of partnership-building and working together, broken chains were also painted on and around hands to symbolize not only the histories of enslavement for Indigenous and African diasporic peoples, but also the racial, cultural and socio-historical tensions/conflict between these communities. Ironically, such tensions and conflicts underlie the potential for partnership and solidarity-building. As demonstrated by the personal journey of the young man described above, tension and conflict can be anticipated, and are perhaps a necessary part of the process of healing on the journey towards working together.

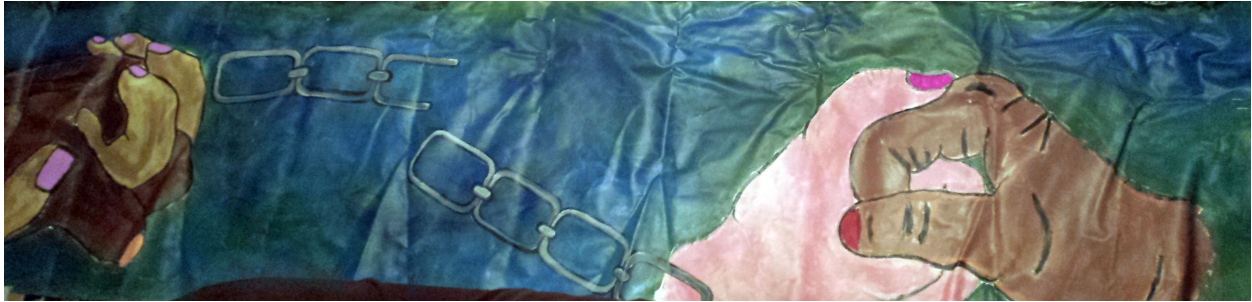


Figure 5: All Directions Mural - while many hands were painted on the mural to symbolize partnerships, broken chains were also painted to symbolize not only the histories of enslavement for Indigenous and African diasporic peoples, but also the racial, cultural and socio-historical tension/conflict that surfaced throughout the workshop.

Limitations

All of the participants were leaders in their communities. As a result, this sample is not representative of youth more generally, nor was that the intention in this qualitative study. Despite their leadership and activism within their communities, these youth still struggled to come to terms with their feelings around solidarity-building across difference. This makes the reflections offered herein all the more insightful in the larger conversation about Indigenous - Black partnership building for HIV prevention. Another limitation related to collecting data from groups (e.g. during focus groups and mural making) rather than on an individual basis (e.g. interviews), is participants did not have an opportunity to expand upon their ideas and opinions in a space free of censorship and surveillance from their peers, which may have unintentionally contributed to the majority of the youth's conformity to the project objectives and process (Hyden & Bulow, 2003; Jowett & O'Toole, 2006). The more nuanced tensions around race and racism were highlighted through candid one-on-one conversations with one youth (Wilson & Flicker, under review). Lastly, this project (by necessity) followed a very tight timeline. More time could have been devoted to unpacking and exploring inter-community tensions in a mixed focus group prior to beginning the creation of a collaborative exercise like the mural making.

Discussion

Very early on in the process of engaging in the focus groups and the mural-making workshop, both Indigenous and ACB youth leaders expressed a lot of optimism at the thought of working together as a form of co-resistance. The youth drew on their justification for the promise of such a collaborative process from the similar experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by their respective communities. For the youth leaders, such collaborative spaces were particularly important for the exchange of art, music, dance, history, culture and knowledge. From such exchange, the youth posited that diasporic and Indigenous models of health and healing could be honored in the fight against HIV in their communities. For Indigenous youth, such opportunities for exchange were also integral for cultural preservation and for sharing their stories, which are

often erased from public consciousness in the nation-state of Canada. In this, creating spaces for cross-community exchange are important sites for place-making, expressing, and remembering within an exclusionary nation-state built on erasing and undermining Indigenous and African histories, cultures and presence.

Despite this shared optimism, different youth came to this collaborative process at different points of understanding and engagement with the issues around racial politics, colonial history and collaboration. Some youth expressed their “readiness” for engaging with these issues and the process, and had personal or familial experiences with negotiating tensions around racism. For others, cross-community collaborations were spaces heavily fraught with both internal and external tensions, contradictions and conflict. Two of the more salient tensions highlighted by the youth, and which arose in their interactions, were competing priorities or engagement in “oppression Olympics,” so to speak. This metaphor highlights the ways both Black and Indigenous people might insist on the primacy and uniqueness of their own oppression and suffering as being so all-encompassing that it challenges the possibility of maintaining relationships of oppression relative to “the other” group (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 105). Visually, these tensions were represented on the mural in the collage, which had various images and messages from different social movements (some with conflicting interests given the aforementioned tensions between Indigenous and anti-racist scholarship (Lawrence & Dua, 2005)) relevant to these communities; as well as the broken chains, which symbolized mental slavery and the breaking of connectivity between the groups.

One of the most interesting revelations in the discussions and interactions was the nuanced ways both African diasporic and Indigenous youth participated in the oppression of the other. For Black youth, who were first and second generation immigrants from continental Africa and the Caribbean, they were largely ignorant to the historic and ongoing oppression faced by Indigenous people on Turtle Island. Lawrence and Dua write that non-Natives, including people of colour, are reluctant to acknowledge the ongoing colonial project and the fact that although we all share the same land base, we have different relationships to this land and the terms on which we occupy it (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). While there are certainly inherent tensions and contradictions in people of colour’s connection to the colonial project through immigration and settlement processes, and while for some groups there may be a reluctance to understand the operations of colonialism, among the ACB youth in this project that was not the case. Once made aware of Indigenous realities, the ACB youth leaders became really interested in understanding and were disgruntled that they had not learned this history in school. As such, this is more indicative of the thorough project of erasure of Indigenous presence in wider Canadian society, which is perpetuated through the colonial education system. Relatedly, Indigenous youth participants rightly raised suspicion of and problematized the multicultural rhetoric within Canada. Canada’s emphasis on multiculturalism as an asset is used to demarcate its difference from the U.S, while simultaneously denying the prevalence of anti-Black racism and colonial relations with Indigenous peoples within its borders (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009). Interestingly, Canada’s introduction of the *Multiculturalism Act* in 1971, overlapped with the

passage of the White Paper (1969) to eliminate "Indian status and Canada's fiduciary responsibility to status Indians" in the same year (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 136). The multicultural rhetoric serves to diffuse and dilute Indigenous presence as just another homogenous "cultural group within a multicultural mosaic" (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 115), as Native people are viewed as merely "paler islands floating in a darker multicultural sea" that drowns ongoing Indigenous struggles (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 121).

The significance of decolonization in collaborative processes was reasonably stressed by some Indigenous youth leaders to symbolize a state of thinking about and being in the world that breaks down the learned propensity for colonial violence and control, ignorance and appropriation of the ways of knowing and doing of others. Decolonization supports the tenets of self-determination (Smith, 1999). Importantly, the need for mental decolonization was also applicable for Indigenous communities, as the Indigenous youth leaders spoke about anti-black racism within their families and some expressed such sentiments in their own interactions with the ACB youth throughout the workshop. This again highlights that different youth came to this process from different points of engagement with the ideas of cross-community collaboration and solidarity-building. For instance, it is only after engaging in these new relationships with ACB youth in the simulated space of this project, that one youth began his personal journey of reflecting on his own feelings around anti-black racism and collaborations with other communities. This highlights that it is not enough to conceive of solidarity building processes as ideal, utopic spaces of co-resistance, art and friendship. These processes are necessarily difficult and the places from which young people engage with these issues should be honored and respected with patience and understanding in order to realize their transformative, consciousness-raising potential.

Black and Aboriginal people share strong interconnections, locally, globally and historically. In seeking ways of working together as a source of mutual empowerment and co-resistance, it is worthwhile to spend some time unpacking what decolonizing cross-community collaborations might entail. The findings of this project demonstrate that genuine collaboration begins by acknowledging that different groups of people have different experiences of white supremacy (i.e. whiteness as slavery, genocide and orientalism), which is effective because the system implicates groups oppressed by it in the oppression of others (Smith, 2006). For instance, all non-Native people are able to join the colonial project of settling on Indigenous lands. Meanwhile, "all non-Black peoples are promised that if they comply, they will not be at the bottom of the racial hierarchy" (Smith, 2006, p. 69). Strategic alliances are not solely based on shared victimization because these differing relations to the white supremacist apparatus are not equal or equitable to each other. Instead, strategic alliances entail that each ally is accountable for their contribution to the oppression of others; acknowledges their stake in the struggles of the others (i.e. Indigenous sovereignty and land repatriation; anti-black racism and so on); de-centers whiteness; and dismantles the white supremacist apparatus (Smith, 2006; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The colonial system benefits from the fact that Black and Indigenous communities are in "perpetual states of crisis" and struggle for daily survival (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 131).

These daily battles must be taken into consideration in co-resistance struggles. For some Indigenous youth this meant respecting that they are needed as leaders and healers in their communities first and foremost, a mending process that is ongoing.

Decolonizing processes of alliance building requires mutual education of ACB and Indigenous communities on each other's histories and realities. This means interrogating how "stolen people (i.e. ACB people) on stolen land" can situate themselves in relation to Indigenous peoples who are "struggling to reclaim that stolen land," (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 125). This requires reflection on what it means to be an ally to Indigenous and settler of colour struggles, and a discussion of how communities hold each other accountable. Decolonizing processes of alliance building requires valuation and honoring of the process and time required for meaningful relationship building, respect and friendship (Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009), as the Medicine Wheel, The Two Row Wampum, and Ubuntu symbols encourage. It also requires combatting anti-black racism, the constant "erasure of Indigenous presence," (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 111) and "exclusionary racial classifications" that ignore people of both Black and Indigenous ancestry (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009, p. 126).

Conclusion

Decolonizing activism and solidarity building is significant for HIV prevention efforts within and between Aboriginal and ACB communities in this post-Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HART) era. "The failed promise that providing treatment could wash away all the injustices and forms of structural violence that lead to new HIV infections" has been realized (Guta et al., 2011, p. 24). Young people are critical in resistance struggles to combat the surmounting issues around Indigenous sovereignty, anti-Blackness, health, intergenerational healing and HIV. Youth can be brilliant leaders in the struggles to de-center the management of disease (i.e. the business of HIV) and refocus on community mobilization, empowerment, and the sharing of stories, resources, culture, worldviews and history, which have been so integral for the embodied health and wellbeing of Indigenous and African diasporic peoples. Their potential in solidarity-building approaches should be supported (financially, emotionally, and socially) in order to create mutually caring, decolonial collectives of resistance that addresses the social determinants of HIV (Guta et al., 2011; Simpson, 2014). Importantly, such partnerships between Indigenous and African diasporic peoples are fraught with tensions, conflicts and contradictions that require decolonization in the form of mutual respect of where communities are at; acknowledgement of the nuanced forms of white supremacy and each community's participation in the white supremacist apparatus; mutual education; accountability; and meaningful relationship building.

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